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Emptying the Ocean and Other Poems

Kim Fahner



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Emptying the ocean

(for T)

“ . . . methodically emptying the boat a pint
of ocean at a time.”

—Michael Crummey, *The Innocents*

Begin with tears, saltwater.

Know we're all made up of brine:
from seaweed ribbon and rough edge of starfish;
split shells of cockles and oysters, opened;
dusk of whale fins, mirror of fish scales;
salt, and water, and evening light on skin.

Know we're all made up of stars:
from unmapped edge of galaxies, hitched breath;
place of origin, cusp of climax, wave that swells;
current of spent atoms, swept across pinpricked sky;
a periodic table that veils itself in elemental lace.

Begin with tears, saltwater.

But, then, find a dory that cradles,
floats, comforts, carries you
through a fierce Atlantic storm.

Waterlogged, you must empty it,
carefully, one bucket, then another—
a pint of ocean at a time.

Outskirts

Swim out into a northern lake,
just beyond the city limits,
and then hear that maybe
there's a blue green algae bloom
after you're already in the water.

Just don't put your head under.

People swim here all the time,
have for years, so one bloom
is the same as the next,
and the health unit
doesn't have jurisdiction—
not here, not anymore.

*If you don't swallow any water,
and you don't rub your eyes,
then you'll be fine.*

In the midst of it all,
you breaststroke through constellations
of blue green algae, the bloom
parting around you as you swim,
tiny galaxies exploding at elbows & knees,
so scattered, trailing in your wake.

An Elegy for Australia, Burning

i) K'Gari (Fraser Island)

Stand at the edge of the ocean,
under a full moon rising, and then
look up to the Southern Cross, knowing
you'll only see it once in this lifetime.

Stand there, so still, and see a wild dingo
lope furtive along the sand's ragged edge,
its bright eyes reflecting light as it spots you—
dashes into undergrowth, where it's most safe.

Lightning strike in November, and that spark catches,
ruins the wildest parts of paradise—so that some dingoes
disappear, vanish into greenery that burns too bright
to speak of survival. So many calendar days, up in flames.

ii) New South Wales

An ecologist says that eight thousand koalas have died,
trapped high in the eucalyptus branches—
the leaves so flammable, filled with oil—
and those trees have gone up like Roman candles,
fierce fireworks spinning out of control.

The kangaroos rush ahead of the flames,
try to outrun the impossible. Days later—
after the firestorm has passed—they are found,
charred statues of bodies so caught up in wire fences,
effigies mounted shadowbox grotesque.

iii) Hollowed out things

Here are the online photos of hollowed out things:
a woman clinging to her man, arms wrapped tightly
around his torso, a silent sob so frozen, captured on film;
orphaned koalas, fur burned from the skin around their eyes,
gazes vacant and frightened, sheltered in a laundromat;
someone kneeling, against a blood red sky,
weeping for the loss of her husband and son;
tourists stranded on a beach, trapped by highest flames,
waiting for rescue from a ship that sails an ocean blue.

A heart—your own broken heart—such a hollowed out thing.

iv) Condolences

And we will sit, in our quiet January places,
with winter snowbanks & eavestrough icicles,
and then wonder what we should do:
shake our heads, confounded, shocked by the stories;
say “horrible, horrible” and then make a pot of tea;
send notes via email to friends in New South Wales,
asking if they’re well, and hoping to hear they are;
scan social media feeds, donating to save koalas,
knowing—all the while—that this is only the beginning.

v) Out of control

You are “out of control,” a fire that spreads on one
or more fronts, an uncontained perimeter, a prayer
that someone speaks quietly in the middle of the night.

You are place names on a map in a country I once visited,
home to hills and fields filled with wallabies and kangaroos
that jumped next to the path where I walked, peering curiously
at me and keeping their distance in pre-dawn light.

You are “out of control,” and my stomach turns at the thought,
of how the planet warms because of us, and how we turn away,
shuffle our feet, think that our own burning times will not arrive.

KIM FAHNER lives and writes in Sudbury, Ontario. Her latest book of poems is *These Wings* (Pedlar Press, 2019). She was the fourth poet laureate for the City of Greater Sudbury (2016-18) and was the first woman appointed to the role. Kim is a member of the League of Canadian Poets, a supporting member of the Playwrights Guild of Canada, and is the Ontario representative for The Writers' Union of Canada (2020-22). She may be reached via her author website at www.kimfahner.com.